

## Prologue

### What Socrates Didn't Like about Poets

Imagine a warm day, spring in the year 399 BCE. Socrates is on trial for his life in the Stoa Basileios. The charge against him is corrupting the youth of Athens. According to the prosecutors, he has undermined the authority of the state. As well as being mixed up with the worst of the Tyrants in the troubles of 404, his ideas about the gods are suspect. He is said to have sympathized with Anaxagoras, who was driven from the city for declaring that the sun was a red-hot stone.

Socrates has conducted himself throughout the trial with his usual composure. He is to be judged by five hundred citizens; they are ranged around him, listening to his defense. He has never set himself up, he insists, as a man of wisdom. When his friend Chaerephon asked the oracle at Delphi, "Is there anyone wiser than Socrates?" and she replied, "Socrates is the wisest of men," he immediately set out to disprove it.

"Knowing I have no wisdom," he says, "I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand."

First of all he went to this and that politician, hoping he would find in them such ways of thinking, such fine conclusions, that it would be shown straightaway that the politician was much wiser than he. But when he pressed first one and then the other with questions, it soon became clear that they weren't wise at all. And he managed to alienate some powerful men into the bargain.

Next he went to the poets, thinking to himself, you will be detected; now you will find out that you are more ignorant than they are. He took them some of the most elaborate passages in their own writings and asked what the meaning of them was, thinking that they would teach him something.

“Will you believe me?” he asks his jurors. “There is hardly a person present [here] who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did themselves. That showed me in an instant that not by wisdom do poets write poetry but by a sort of genius and inspiration; they are like diviners or soothsayers who also say many fine things but do not understand the meaning of them. And the poets appeared to me to be much in the same case.”

Socrates’ five hundred jurors find him guilty by a majority of sixty. The prosecution demands the death penalty, while Socrates is eventually induced to propose for himself the penalty of a fine. The vote is for death by an increased majority of eighty. Perhaps some of his judges were poets themselves, or rhapsodes (poetry reciters). His critique of the poets certainly can’t have done him much good for poetry was held in great esteem as a vital part of any valuable citizen’s education. A month later Socrates drinks the appropriate measure of hemlock and joins that eternity which (he consoles friends with the thought) may turn out to be “only a single night.”